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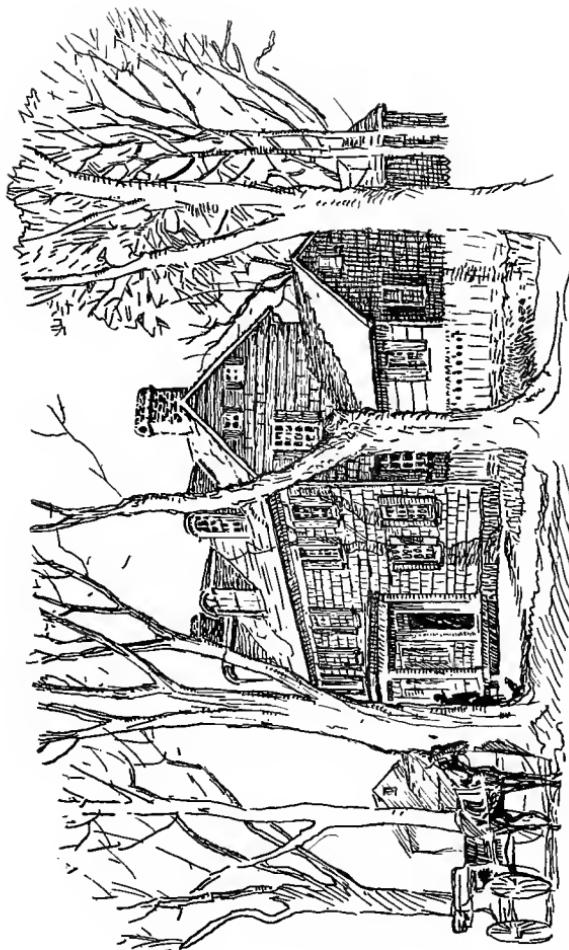
“The Judges”



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“THE JUDGES”
FRONT VIEW

“The Judges,”

An Old and Interesting Sussex County Mansion.

HISTORICAL SKETCH BY HENRY C. CONRAD.

The House as it is to-day, with Glimpses of its
Contents and the Present Occupant.

BY EDWARD N. VALLANDIGHAM.

Georgetown, Delaware.
1920.



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PRESS OF HUBERT A. ROOP
WILMINGTON, DEL.

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

BY HENRY C. CONRAD.



HE traveller entering Georgetown from the southwest, by the Laurel Road, is impressed with the four modern dwellings that of recent years have been erected and are now occupied as homes by four of the prosperous attorneys of the town. Next in order comes the "tanyard lot" that of late has come into the control of an enterprising doctor of the town; for years the lot was owned and operated as a tanyard by Edward Wootten and Dr. Richards, and both they and a former owner are credited with having made money by the old time method of tanning leather.

Adjoining the "tanyard lot" is the home of the Resident Associate Judge of Sussex County, possibly as interesting a house as can be found in these parts. The house is supposed to have been built by Peter Robinson, just when, has not been exactly ascertained. Peter Robinson, born in 1775, was a son of Thomas Robinson, the Loyalist. He was reared in Indian River Hundred, and after a course of law study with Chancellor Ridgely, at Dover, was admitted to the bar in 1799. He then settled in Georgetown, where for thirty years he was actively

engaged in the practice of his profession, indulging as a diversion in politics, and becoming the acknowledged leader of his party in the county. He served three terms as Secretary of State, under three Sussex County Governors, and on the adoption of the new State Constitution in 1831, became the first associate justice of the Court of Errors and Appeals for Sussex County, serving until his death in 1836. Soon after his admission to the bar, he marred his cousin Arcada Robinson, and then it was that he secured six or eight of the lots laid out on the original town plot of Georgetown, embracing about three acres, and erected the house in which he spent the remainder of his life.

In construction, the best of materials must have been used. The sills and framing, and most of the floors are of white oak, and the sheathing of heart cypress shingles, fashioned by hand, and brought from the Cypress swamp some twenty miles away, as solid and free from decay today, as they were a hundred years ago. The house is stately in design, two stories and attic. I have been told by a very old lady who could recall events happening prior to 1840, that when a little girl she remembered an attempt to throw water over the roof of the Robinson house, by a primitive hand fire engine, then the pride of the town boys, it being reckoned the tallest house in town.

As originally built each room had an open fireplace, the kitchen fireplace being six feet in width. Ample outbuildings were provided, and on the corner of the intersecting street, a neat office building,



PETER ROBINSON
ASSOCIATE JUSTICE

still standing, typical of the early Sussex County law office, was erected, and here, surrounded by his law books and many classical volumes, Peter Robinson wrought and delved for thirty years. Not an old man, but with three score of years completed, he died, and his remains were laid at rest with his Robinson ancestors in the graveyard at Saint Georges Chapel in Indian River Hundred.

At his death he left to survive him, three children, Thomas Robinson, Jr., who was elected to Congress in 1838; Alfred P. Robinson, who was Secretary of State under Governor Ross, and the father of Alfred P. Robinson, the Chief Justice; and a daughter Mary, who, in 1833, was married to Edward Wootten. Both sons were lawyers.

At the death of Peter Robinson, by an allotment among his children the homestead went to the son, Alfred P. Robinson, but afterwards, by agreement, it was conveyed to the daughter, Mary, and thus became the home of Judge and Mrs. Edward Wootten. There are people who remember that when it came into their control that considerable repair, and possibly some alterations, were then made in the mansion. Two handsome mantle pieces of gray marble, that still remain, one in the parlor, and one in the library, were likely installed at that time. The date 1845 on the corner piece of the spouting on the house would indicate that it was about that time that the improvements were added to the premises.

Edward Wootten became Peter Robinson's successor in the little law office on the corner, as well

as in the homestead. Wootten was the son of Peter G. Wootten who had made a competency as a store-keeper at Laurel, had served more than once in the General Assembly, and who doubtless took pride in so educating his son, Edward, as that he was sent to Georgetown as a law student under Thomas Cooper, then the leading lawyer in Sussex County, and who had served a term in Congress. As an evidence that the father was a man of decided opinions, and not afraid to express them, I have in my possession a copy of "The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church," published in 1804, in which is written "I, Peter G. Wootten left the Methodist Church first of January, 1812, and on the same day left off the use of strong liquor."

Edward Wootten became a prominent and important factor in public affairs in Sussex County, soon after his admission to the bar in 1830. He was the recognized county leader of the Democratic party for thirty years, was offered a unanimous nomination by his party for Congress when only thirty-five years of age but declined; and two years later accepted the appointment as Associate Justice for Sussex County, which position he held for a term of forty years. He was recognized as a sound and learned lawyer, and he rendered the State a most valuable service in the years he occupied a seat on the bench, holding the full regard and respect of the bar throughout the State.

The Robinson house became known as the Wootten house, by reason of its occupancy for forty years, and more, by Judge Wootten and his accom-

plished wife. A cordial hospitality was dispensed and many are the stories of the beauty of Mrs. Wootten, of her accomplishments, the grace and ease of her entertainment, and the old time charm of manner with which she presided over her household, and gave cordial welcome to her guests.

In this house was born the only child of the Wootten marriage, Alfred Robinson Wootten, the pride of his parents, a brilliant, dashing young man, who studying law with George M. Dallas, of Philadelphia, entered the bar with great promise of an unusual career. His marriage to Rhoda Burton, the only daughter of Governor William Burton, was the social event of the time, followed shortly after by his appointment as Attorney General of the State. His promising career was brought to an early close by his death when only thirty years of age. His sole survivor was a daughter, Mary Robinson Wootten, to whom, by will of the grandfather, Judge Wootten, the premises were devised, and who as owner cherishes the memories of the past, and shows the warmest attachment for the home of her girlhood, and seeks to maintain its dignity and traditions. The house has been appropriately named "The Judges."

When the writer came to Georgetown in 1909, to take up his residence as Associate Judge of Sussex, this old house became his home. It was the home in town that most attracted me. It had been my habit when coming to Georgetown, during the lifetime of Judge Wootten, to call on him and pay my respects. He was always most kind and courteous

to me. Here I have lived for eleven years in quiet and content; the house has sheltered me comfortably and I have been able to give rein to some of my fads and fancies, and to bid welcome to friends and neighbors beneath my roof. My neighbors have been cordial and friendly.

The boxwood that was, doubtless, planted by Judge Robinson, in what was the prize flower garden of the town, in the old days, still flourishes; and attracts much attention from the passing automobileists of today. The stately pine tree that towers above the sturdy maples and the gaunt walnut, its near neighbor; and the spreading silver leaf poplar, not far away, all hold sweet communion with each other, and give promise of standing sentinel over the old house in the years to come, just as they have sheltered and befriended the judges and their loved ones in the past.





"THE JUDGES"

VIEW FROM THE SOUTH-WEST

AN UP-TO-DATE CHAT OF THE OLD HOUSE AND ITS PRESENT OCCUPANT.

BY EDWARD N. VALLANDIGHAM.



OT the oldest of the shingled houses in Georgetown, but perhaps the most charming, is "The Judges," a two-and-a-half-story structure with hooded chimneys, and deep dormers of beautiful proportion and detail. The whole house in its placid silvery gray looks like a dream dwelling come to reality. One judge built this house a century or more ago, and long occupied it; a second was its tenant far into his own old age; today it has for occupant a third Sussex judge, the man whom it fits as if it had been made solely to express his taste, temper and whole personality, the Honorable Henry C. Conrad, long an active lawyer and public man at Wilmington, but now perhaps for the first time truly at home in this serene retreat in the heart of Sussex.

An "office," also old and shingled, is included within the grounds of "The Judges," not an uncommon adjunct to the homes of country lawyers, and perhaps quite as much a domestic safety valve as a

true "den" or sanctum. When the man of law quitted the breakfast table he commonly betook himself to the "office," where, in cool or cold weather, a welcoming hearth fire awaited his coming. No doubt domestic tradition represented the husband and father as immediately immersed in his deeper legal studies, but there was usually a hospitable shabbiness of dusty window panes and worn but thickly upholstered armchairs that wooed to the pipe and at least an hour's indulgence in the morning paper. After these soothing exercises might come a half-hour or so with "Benton's Thirty Years' View" or some such delightful volume of political gossip, or even Warren's now neglected "Ten Thousand a Year," before the claims of cases and clients engaged the legal mind. Senator Bayard, returning from a visit to a remote county seat more than thirty years ago, said that a man of intellect restricted to such a place was apt to take to omnivorous reading or to strong drink. It is suspected that a black bottle often found its place on the shelves among the law books in some of these detached offices. Judge Conrad's office has the agreeable dinginess of such retreats, but one suspects that he prefers most of the time the more spacious rooms of "The Judges" itself. The condition of the old formal garden of box attached to the place justifies the suspicion that horticulture is not Judge Conrad's favorite avocation.

As a matter of fact, the interior of "The Judges" can leave one in no doubt as to its tenant's life-long devotion to antiquarian research and illustrative collection. "The Judges" is a museum of old furni-

ture, rarely interesting pottery of the greatest variety, significant prints relating to persons and places Delawarean, portraits, photographs and, best of all, scores of silhouettes, many of them showing "dear dead women" with that clear loveliness of outline and splendid distinction of carriage that seem to have been characteristic of our ancestors from the early nineteenth century backward to the political infancy of the emancipated thirteen states. Among the books that Judge Conrad cherishes is a collection of volumes about Delaware persons and things, written by Delawareans or published in Delaware, a collection that will probably go to the Delaware Historical Society when the present owner shall have ceased to concern himself with sublunary things, old or new. Another valuable collection of books is made up entirely of volumes dealing with the history of American Methodism, a fitting collection for a Delawarean to have made, since Methodism had so early and distinguished a beginning on this peninsula. Many of Judge Conrad's treasures have their story attached, and it is delightful to see the big, quiet man wander from point to point along the wall as he tells you in that deep, rich voice of this or that adventure dear to the ear of a collector. Devotion to the antique has not dulled Judge Conrad's sympathies with the issues and the struggles of today.

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